

DOES ISLAM ALLOW THE TAKING OF HOSTAGES, SUICIDE, etc.?

AFTERMATH OF THE 9-11 TERRORIST ATTACK:

Within most of Islam, hostage taking, suicide, or terrorist attacks are not permitted. They are considered a great sin. In the Qur'an, it is written that *"If anyone killed a person, unless it was for murder or spreading mischief on earth, it would be as if he killed all of mankind. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he had saved the lives of all mankind."* (Qur'an 5:32)

Prior to the rise of a minority of extremist, radical, Fundamentalist Muslim clerics:

- The taking and maltreatment of hostages has not been permitted within Islam.
- Suicide has been generally forbidden in Islam.
- Muslims have been forbidden to attack innocent civilians; they have not even been permitted to kill an unarmed soldier in wartime.

Within some faith groups, (e.g. the Baha'i Faith, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and many Protestant denominations) one can appeal to the Pope, a world court, a General Assembly or other authority for a valid interpretation of a theological or moral point. Within Islam, there is no comparable religious hierarchy; the ultimate authority lies in the Qur'an. This is the Holy Book that Muslims believe was dictated by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad in the seventh century CE.

Islam, like Christianity, Judaism, and other religions, is what its adherents understand it to be. This is largely determined by what its religious leaders interpret the Qur'an, Bible, Torah or other religious text to mean. Following the suicide attack in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983, *"Radical Muslim clerics scoured Islam's sacred texts for justifications of violence, and found them. In the years to come, the [radical] clerics and the terrorists widened their license. At first, it included only 'intruders' in Muslim lands: foreign forces, embassies, and civilians. Later it was extended to include 'enemy' installations in third countries, and finally, civilians in the 'lands of unbelief.' No moral red line could stop the escalation."* ²

Such clerics remain a small but very vocal minority within Islam. Unfortunately, the western media rarely gives a balanced presentation of Islamic thought; they tend to over-emphasize the extreme radical Fundamentalist element, and largely ignore moderates within Islam.

Taking of hostages within Islam:

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There have been a number of major hostage takings by Muslims of Christian and Jewish victims. In recent years, the rebels in southern Philippines have frequently taken hostages in their drive to create an independent Islamic state. In 1979, Iranian students took personnel at the American embassy hostage. They held U.S. diplomats and their families for over a year.

- According to *StopRacism*, "*The highest authority in Sunni Islam on [2001]-May 14 condemned the acts of criminals holding 21 hostages on a Philippine island, saying Islam rejects all forms of violence.*" Al Azhar, seat of Sunni Islam's most prestigious institution, issued a statement saying that "*Such acts of violence have nothing to do with Islam...The Grand Imam [Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi] asks people to use their wisdom and understand that it is better just to make individuals accountable for their own actions, rather than hold a religion like Islam accountable. The Muslim religion promotes peace, brotherhood and justice.*" ⁵
- According to author Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, "*To take a hostage is to catch hold of innocent persons by availing of some opportunity and then start bargaining from there. This practice was prevalent in ancient times but it has now assumed a tactical form/shape. This is a great sin and cowardice and is entirely forbidden in Islam as you tend to take revenge from persons for your grievances other than from the concerned person/persons. To bully any innocent person/persons on the basis of some excuse is entirely unjustified in Islam.*"

Suicide within Islam:

"Committing suicide is a grave sin. Many scholars view a person who has committed suicide as someone who has turned his back on Islam altogether." ³ Muslims regard God to be the creator of life. Thus, only God has the right to end life. A manual of Sharia (Islamic law) in the tradition of Imam Shafi'i is called *Reliance of the Traveler*. It lists suicide as among the "enormities" of all sin:

- "*Do not kill yourselves, for Allah is compassionate towards you. Whoever does so, in transgression and wrongfully, We shall roast in a fire, and that is an easy matter for Allah.*" (an-Nisaa 4:29-30)
- Narrated Thabit bin Ad-Dahhak, The Prophet said, "*...whoever commits suicide with piece of iron will be punished with the same piece of iron in the Hell Fire.*" Narrated Jundab the Prophet said, "*A man was inflicted with wounds and he committed suicide, and so Allah said: 'My slave has caused death on himself hurriedly, so I forbid Paradise for him.'*" (Sahih Bukhari 2.445)
- Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "*He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell Fire (forever) and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the Hell-Fire.*" (Sahih Bukhari 2.446). ⁴

However, there is a unique category of suicide called "*self-martyrdom*" which applied in a narrow range of circumstances in combat, and which is believed to guarantee the believer immediate entry into Paradise. Before the 1983 suicide attack in Beirut, Lebanon, only very a few of the most radical Fundamentalist clerics judged kamikaze-type acts to be deeds of "*self-martyrdom*." After Beirut incident, "*an intense debate ensued over religious law, some clerics ruling in favor of the tactic and many against.*" 2

In the *New York Times* interview of moderate Muslim academics on 2001-SEP-30.

- Zaki Badawi, the principal of the Muslim College, in London, UK, discussed the fate of a Muslim who commits suicide: "*God will punish him by making him commit the same act of suicide, the same cycle of torture, on the day of judgment. If he kills himself with a dagger, his punishment is to sink the dagger in his heart again and again.*"

Comments by Muslim authorities about attacks on civilians:

The *New York Times* interviewed a number of moderate Muslim academics on 2001-SEP-30. All agreed that Islam forbids terrorist attacks:

- Taha Jabir Alalwani is a Muslim judge who heads a council that issues Islamic legal opinions for Muslims in North America. Reading a verse from the Qur'an, he said: "*The verse says you have a right to fight those people who try to force you to adopt another religion or to leave your home. But America didn't ask you to abandon your religion. America didn't deport you, or tell you to leave your homes.*"
- Mahmoud Ayoub is a professor of Islamic studies and comparative religion at Temple University. He said: "*The Bible has descriptions of the peaceable kingdom, where the lamb and the lion lay down together, but it also has the Book of Joshua about the bloody conquest of Canaan. Likewise, the Koran has plenty of verses that talk about peace, even with Muhammad's enemies, if they are inclined toward peace. But then there are also verses that advocate war. And so, we have to make choices.*"
- Sheikh Hamza Yusuf is the founder and director of the Zaytuna Institute, an Islamic study center in Hayward, CA. He said: "*The prophet [Muhammad] clearly prohibited killing noncombatants, women and children. The prophet prohibited poisoning wells, which I think can be applied to biological warfare. The prophet prohibited using fire as a means to kill another being, because only the Lord of fire can punish with fire. And the destruction of property is prohibited. Even in war, you can't destroy other people's property.*"

However, the Qur'an has been interpreted by some Islamic clerics as permitting attacks by Palestinians on Israelis. "*Martyrdom is permissible on the battlefield, Dr. Ayoub said.*

Israel is clearly a battlefield, the scholars all said, because Israeli troops have evicted Palestinians from their homes and shot at children. Attacking Israelis is self-defense, which, according to the Koran, is the only acceptable justification for fighting." And, as noted above, general attacks on "civilians in the 'lands of unbelief' " are justified by a small minority of extreme radical Fundamentalist Muslim religious leaders.

References used:

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